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The Principle of Ontological Constructivism in Postnonclassical Psychology

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Abstract

The problems of constructivism in psychological science are discussed and the consequences of acceptance of constructive epistemological attitude are criticized. On that base the principle of ontological constructivism in postnonclassical psychology is proposed.

Keywords

Methodology of psychology, constructivism, subjective reality, ideal model, principle of ontological constructivism.

A characteristic feature of the modern postnonclassical stage of science development is related to the problematization of fundamental attributes of the researched reality, normative grounds of its scientific investigation and subjective structure of knowledge about this reality [6]. Within the framework of postnonclassical science a qualitatively new type of rationality is proposed. It takes into consideration the correlation of product (theory, conception, and model) of cognitive activity not only with specific of the object and means of cognition, but also with the subject of cognition [17]. Consequently, “world picture is derived from value-meaning sphere of (collective or single) subject of cognition, from development level and character of instrumental means of cognition, from model language used to create cognitive images.” [15, P. 77]. Thesis about definiteness of content of cognitive activity (both scientific and everyday) with cultural, motivational-value, cognitive, lingual and other peculiarities of the subject and, as an effect, emphasizing non-reflecting, constructive nature of cognition, mediation of world comprehension with individual constructs formed in ontogenesis, possibility of different ways (models) of events conceptualization, and pluralism of truth have become the methodological grounds of constructivism. The last one is the epistemological position, according to which the human in the processes of perception and thinking not so much reflects the outer world as creates and constructs it [19]. In this connection, it seems necessary to clarify several discussed questions of constructive epistemology as well as to define on their basis explanatory possibilities of the proposed principle of ontological constructivism.

During the last two or three decades the tendencies to interpret reality as a number of constructs of thinking and to underlining the “creation” of this reality by subject in correspondence with the contextualism (increased sensitiveness to lingual and socio-cultural context of cognition), expressed relativity of epistemological problems (“truth is plural, alternative and situational”) and pragmatism of psychological researches have become clear in the methodology of Western psychological science [25]. In the Soviet psychology the legitimating of “constructive frame of mind” (B. I. Pruzhinin) was principally impossible due to the domination of materialistic theory of reflection and representational perspectives. In recent years the publications concentrated on the analysis and systematization of theories and trends related to the paradigm of constructivism have appeared along with attempts to explicate their connection with native psychology[1]. At the same time elabora-

ting several epistemological consequences of the core methodological propositions of constructivist paradigm is not sufficient. So, the aim of the study is to comprehend such consequences and to formulate on this basis the principle of ontological constructivism.

One of such consequences that we would like to discuss is the *problem of reference of subject's ideal constructions to objective reality*. If within the framework of "classical" constructivism (to which, with certain restrictions, I. Kant's epistemology could be attributed) the idea of subject's constructive activity was limited by correlations of the created constructions with some forms of objects' representation, the later (starting with E. Husserl's phenomenology) evolution of constructive attitude led to the denial of such representation and actually eliminated ontological status of the object, "considering it as a pure mental structure created from lingual resources, patterns of perception, norms and conventions of scientific society." [11, P.18]. Such "ontological muteness" of the object of cognition and principal impossibility of going beyond cognitive picture of reality is the epistemological core of such radical forms of constructivism as E. von Glasersfeld's biological-psychological conception, P. Watzlawick's communicative constructivism, H. von Fœrster's "second level cybernetics", H. Maturana and F. J. Varela's theory of the autopoietic systems, G. Roth's neurobiological constructivism, etc. Without grounded analysis of their limitations and advantages (see details in [4]), we would like to emphasize the following: despite of several interesting ideas (in particular, interpretation of world *als ob*[2], expansion of the borders of possible, ability to play free with reality and one's own experience, to build and rebuild them discretionary, etc.), discourse of radical constructivism leads to contradictions and paradoxes[3] and finally to the skeptic cognitive position, when the human "is enable to break through himself/herself, to go beyond their own experience, perceptions and thoughts. One looks at the world and sees in it, like in the mirror, himself/herself… Everything is Me and everything is not Me, other Me, everything is the product …of creativity and imagination." [9, P.77].

Mentioned limitations of the radical constructivism could be overcome due to assumption of referential relation between "second reality" constructed by the subject and objective ontology (what, in particular, characterizes moderate position of H. Vollmer's "hypothetical realism", H. Haken's constructive realism, G. A. Kelly's psychological theory of personal constructs, etc.). This relation is constituted, on the one hand, by functially necessary tasks of the subject's activity and its objective content[4] and, on the other hand, by reality's "resistance", i.e. by natural restrictions imposed on the human's constructive activity by inner evolution of the complex system objects, by dynamic interaction of their structural components, by possible inner tendencies of their development, etc., and also by the final area of social meanings (wider – by the cultural experience) created by people in everyday life. Therefore, the acceptance of constructive attitude doesn't lead to eliminating reality and to anti-realistic conclusions, but to considering the constructed world as a part, section or projection of the real world. "One may consider," V. O. Lektorsky stresses, "that a constructed picture of reality corresponds to the very reality, that notions, categories and schemes of thinking used in cognition correlate with the knowable world, that the cognizing subject is not a closed system…, but open towards the world." [12, P.18]. The subject doesn't construct the objective reality, but works out his/her own comprehension, interpretation of the world, using independently created and validated in practice classificational-estimating patterns which are the personal constructs [8]. This, in its turn, causes production of plural versions of reality, which could conflict with each other. That's why the next consequence of constructive approach that we are going to discuss will be the *problem of proportionality of subjective realities created by persons*.

In that connection it should be emphasized that diversity and mutual discrepancy of conceptual worlds we

live in is not an obstacle, but initial precondition for the productive and equal communication aimed at mutual elaboration of the maximum non-contradictory picture of reality. The matter is that constructions (working hypotheses, cognitive programs, schemes, models, etc.) created by subject are mostly open for the new information, being constantly defined more exactly, precisely and accurately. Without that an adequate regulation of life activity, optimal adaptation to changeable environment and, finally, biological survival of human are impossible (see [13]). So, the subject is consciously or unconsciously disposed to enter sign-symbolic (foremost, verbal) interactions with others, in which such specification and mutual enrichment of the repertory of formed constructs could occur. Forms of realizing the mentioned communicative interactions vary according to the situation: it can be either a silence as a "dissolving" in God or Nature, or a lively dialogue full of intellectual and spiritual meaning, or a monological upholding of one's own position, or a desperate "scream of a soul" [23]. Anyway, each of them must provide the legitimating of intersubjective meanings [3] and mutual creation on that base values and knowledge (discourses, ways of the world interpretation and practical activity, etc.), which is conventional for different ethnical, professional, scientific, and religious groups [19]. Being objectivated, they constitute a special social reality, an everyday "surrounding world" where the human lives [22], and for the person's consciousness "it is vitally necessary that different models of reality should not only coordinate with each other, but harmonically correspond with an everyday social reality." [4]. Thus, creating in the process of interaction, communication and other forms of social relations more or less congruent constructs which put in order reality and fulfill adaptive function, is principally possible. Another question is about the *nature and functional specific of such constructs*. To answer it we should turn attention to analyzing the processes of the subject's narrative constructing the life worlds. Expediency of discussing narrative discourses[5] could be explained by the fact that, firstly, "narrative form, both oral and written, is the fundamental psychological, linguistic, cultural, and philosophical ground of our attempts to find the consent with nature and life condition" [5, P.30], and, secondly, as M. Mayr says, "personal processes are psychologically directed by the stories the persons live in, and by the stories they tell" (quot. in [18, P.63]).

According to the logic of defining narrative as a semiotic system used by the subject to put in order the person's experience, to obtain knowledge, which structures their perception and comprehension of the world and their place in the world (J. Brockmeier, J. S. Bruner, J. K. Gergen, R. Harre, F. Jameson, M. Mayr, T. R. Sarbin, N. V. Chepeleva and others) and also on the assumption of reflections, cited above, it is appropriate to consider narrative as an ideal model[6] presented in the human's consciousness. The same interpretation of narrative could be found in the works of several representatives of constructive paradigm. For example, J. Brockmeier and R. Harre postulate that "a narrative works as a very flexible model… It connects well-known and unknown, it is used for explanation (or for interpretation) of some phenomena, referring to the rules (or schemes, structures, scripts, frames, metaphors, etc.), which contain general knowledge." [5, P.39–40]. So, from this point of view, narratives obtain several features peculiar to all ideal models: "a) they carry hierarchically structured information (knowledge) about model systems; b) this knowledge has a reflective character; c) this knowledge is disposed to communication with other people and with themselves as others (described by the notion "meaning"); d) dependence of this knowledge on the person's needs (described by the notion "sense")" [1, P.49]. Moreover, it is stressed, that information in such models could be characterized by volume, adequacy, and completeness [2].

Volume of model information is defined by number of themes (thematic structures), characters (personages), plot lines, life circumstances and events, estimating judgments, meaningful positions, etc. Adequacy of narrative model corresponds with the measure of reproducing the main elements of substantive and formal structure

in the simulated fragment of reality, which in this case relates to self-consistent range of described acts and events, their logical sequence, meaningful integrity of the story [14], and its plausibility [24]. Completeness of the model information unites indices of volume and adequacy, “being greater, the greater its volume and adequacy are, and smaller, the more complex simulated system is” [2, P. 153].

Finally, we would point out some of the functions of narrative models. Firstly, they put structural frames for interpretation of reality and order life elements, providing their comprehension (by means of “synthesis of new senses on the base of dialogue both internal and dialogue with other people and with cultural works” [21, P. 20]), and transformation into the personal experience. Secondly, they organize, structure, and articulate phenomenological experience of the human, creating the possibility to translate it to the other person [14]. Thirdly, they provide adaptation to complex conditions of life activity through experiencing adaptive significance of descriptions and interpretations of the world [11, P. 24]. Fourthly, they constitute the feeling of inner-self, personal identity, and self-concept at all [5], [7], [18]. Fifthly, they allow objectifying some major qualities of human, in particular, their basic life conceptions, attitudes, motives, etc., and, finally, their “version” of themselves and their own life [14]. Sixthly, they provide the person’s self-development, allowing “to work out life plans and programs, to see life perspectives and to act according to them” [14, P. 33].

So, conducted analysis of the main problems, related to constructive epistemology, allows formulating the following definition of the principle of ontological constructivism: *mental constructions created by subject are considered to be ideal models, which are grounded on conventional system of ontological assumptions about reality and provide interpretative-cognitive and adaptive functions*.

Thus, let’s sum up and point out some perspectives of the study. We have critically reviewed several consequences of constructive epistemological attitude, which are particular to postnonclassical rationality, and have made an attempt to formulate on that base the principle of ontological constructivism. In particular, we have shown the reference of ideal constructions to reality and the ways of providing relative correspondence of subjective realities. Besides, on example of narrative constructions we have demonstrated that last ones could be considered as ideal models different in volume, adequacy and completeness, which realize several specific functions, foremost interpretative and adaptive. According to this, perspectives of the following studies are related to analyzing the specific of using qualitative methods in researching such models.

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1 For instance, there are several attempts to draw a parallel between some ideas of native psychologists and principal positions of constructivism referring to L. S. Vygotsky's idea about the main role of sign and meaning in human consciousness development; V. P. Zinchenko and M. K. Mamardashvili's concept of “psychic reality” and A. M. Leontiev's notion of “world picture”, which explain in a particular way a mediate influence of psychic formations on human's life activity [16], [19].

2 As if (Germ.).

3 For example: How could created reality be cognized by means of the cognitive instruments which product the same reality? What is the advisability of transition from one mental construction to another? What is the reason in emotional relation, e.g. in empathy, towards another person, if he and his spiritual experiences are my constructions? How can the brain be a part of the world and at the same time to create the world? [11].

4 This is the position of so-called constructive realism, the core of which could be presented in the following formula: “Knowable reality is not “given to subject immediately” and is not constructed by him, but is built by means of activity… Human and every cognizing creature in general percepts and comprehends reality within the limits of some ontological prerequisites. These prerequisites could be experienced as “given” (for example, in case of perception or using native language) or could be consciously constructed as it takes place in scientific cognition.” [10, P.36–37].

5 Using the word-combination “narrative discourse”, we consider the narrative as a type of discourse. Narrative is a logically connected and chronologically ordered story about real or fictional (but always subjectively significant) life events. Notion “discourse” generally means the totality of expressions (verbal acts) on set theme within communication of individuals, groups or societies and also different kinds of social texts obtained due to that (see for details: [14, P.16–18]).

6 Generally, model “is an analogue (scheme, structure, sign system) of some fragment of social or natural reality, of human culture product or conceptual-theoretical formation, etc.” [20, P. 374]. Ideal model is one of the main types of models, “in which abstracting from substrate (material form) is done. Ideal models could be figurative and conceptual. These models exist in the mind of an individual and in social consciousness as well.” [2, P. 154].

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